

Ukraine deal fuels trouble for 'Creepy Joe' Biden's son, Hunter

Josh Glancy, Washington

VIDEO

Possible presidential run could be at risk from the business links and private life of Hunter

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Hunter Biden at the funeral of his brother Beau in Delaware in 2015. He later began a relationship with Beau's widow Hallie, centre, being comforted by her father-in-law, Joe Biden. Patrick Semansky/Associated Press

Joe Biden has spent much of the past week in a defensive crouch, the target of a series of complaints about his habit of making women uncomfortable by being overly tactile. But the “Creepy Joe” narrative is just one of the pitfalls that awaits the former vice-president as he edges closer to declaring himself in the Democratic presidential primary.

Many in the Democratic Party's progressive wing are painting the 76-year-old as out of touch and the wrong standard bearer to assemble a diverse and youthful winning coalition. Despite polls showing that if he does run he will be the most popular candidate in the party, there are plenty of reasons for Biden to steer clear.

One is his son, Hunter, 49, whose business career raises questions about special treatment and nepotism that are resurfacing as Biden gears up for a White House run.

Hunter's private life also does little to burnish his father's image. In 2014 he was kicked out of the Navy Reserve for taking cocaine. In 2017 it was revealed that he was dating Hallie Olivere, the widow of his brother Beau, who died of cancer in 2015.

In a bitter divorce, his wife, Kathleen, claimed he had spent “extravagantly on his own interests (including drugs, alcohol, prostitutes, strip clubs and gifts for women with whom he has sexual

relations), while leaving the family with no funds to pay legitimate bills”.

Headlines in America were dominated last week with reports of Biden's touchy-feely antics, with seven women claiming on the record that he made them feel uncomfortable by touching them inappropriately or smelling their hair.

The focus on Biden's behaviour has rekindled interest in Hunter. What do the son's activities say about the father? Like one of the controversies swirling around the Trump presidency, this story involves millions of dollars and Ukraine. The president's supporters are gleeful.

In April 2014 Hunter was appointed to the board of Burisma, a large Ukrainian energy company. His role was to oversee regulatory compliance. His father, at the time, was the Obama administration's point man for Ukraine, focusing particularly on an anti-corruption drive, and had visited Kiev, the capital.

Bank records show that Hunter's firm, Rosemont Seneca Partners, received an estimated \$3m in payments from Burisma in just over a year. Hunter had worked as a gambling industry lobbyist in Washington and had no relevant experience for his highly paid berth at Burisma.

“Hunter Biden has no background in energy or Ukraine or regulatory compliance,” said Peter Schweizer, an investigative journalist and editor-at-large at Breitbart News. “He has no track record as an international businessman. There's really no good explanation as to why he gets that sweet a deal.”

Michael Caputo, a political strategist and former adviser on Trump's presidential campaign, said: “The whole gambit of Biden flying in to help Ukraine, then his son Hunter flying in to mop up the proceeds smells to high heaven.”

Oliver Bullough, the author of *Moneyland*, a book about global corruption, also investigated the Burisma deal. He said: “Of course it's unseemly. Hunter Biden's basically trading off his dad's job to get rich. He's a liability.”

Despite his father's anti-corruption message, Hunter became involved with a company mired in deep legal troubles. Burisma's owner, Mykola Zlochevsky, had been ecology minister in the government of Viktor Yanukovich, the pro-Russian Ukrainian president who was forced into exile after a popular uprising in 2014.

Zlochevsky and Yanukovich's political party was heavily reliant on another well-connected American: Paul Manafort, who later became Donald Trump's campaign chairman and was recently sentenced to 7½ years in prison for tax and bank fraud.

The same month that Hunter joined the Burisma board, Britain's Serious Fraud Office froze \$23m in bank accounts in London that allegedly belonged to Zlochevsky, as part of an investigation into money laundering.

Last week, the Ukrainian general prosecutor, Yuriy Lutsenko, revealed that he was renewing interest in the Burisma case and the Biden family's connection to the company, giving the Bidens an additional headache.

When originally confronted over Hunter's connection to Burisma in 2015, a Biden spokesman said: “Hunter Biden is a private citizen and a lawyer.”

Schweizer has long had the Bidens in his sights. In a book published last year — *Secret Empires: How the American Political Class Hides Corruption and Enriches Family and Friends* — he also makes allegations about a \$1bn deal that Hunter made on highly favourable terms with a Chinese government investment firm, having first travelled to China on Air Force Two with his father in 2011.

“I think this [Hunter] is a central concern that Biden has,” said Schweizer, who accuses Biden of not being the down-to-earth character he claims to be. “His public persona is ‘lunch bucket Joe’, a regular guy, not worth that much money, who has been in political life 40 years. So all this runs contrary to his image.”

Caputo sees danger ahead for Biden. "Joe Biden has a solid legacy to rest on," he said. "But if he gets in the race, his reputation could be destroyed and he will have a much smaller seat on which to sit."

Others remain optimistic about a Biden candidacy. "I do think Biden fever could break out in the Democratic primary," said Antjuan Seawright, a Democratic strategist who advised Hillary Clinton in 2016. "There are plenty of people on the sidelines waiting to put on the Joe Biden for President T-shirt."

Seawright believes that Biden can potentially overcome his weaknesses. "There's no such thing as the perfect candidate," he said. "There are only a few people in the primary who can bring the many parts of the party together. Joe Biden is one of them."

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